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SUBJECT: NORTHERN UGANDA: RETURNS OF DISPLACED PERSONS
INCREASING

REF: KAMPALA 1583

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In northern Uganda, humanitarian organizations are reporting increases in the numbers of internally displaced persons returning to their land. The process of "decongestion" of the camps has led to the spontaneous movement of IDPs from more crowded camps to areas where they can more easily access their land. The arrival of harvest time and perceptions of a declining security threat from the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) are motivating the voluntary movements. Camp decongestion is increasing food security, creating less crowded living quarters, and relocating IDPs near traditional trading centers. Nonetheless, re-establishment of property boundaries, lack of infrastructure to support basic needs, and the revitalization of economic activity are posing significant challenges to returnees. Serious human rights concerns remain, but field reports suggest a decrease in abuses perpetrated by security forces. As the security situation continues to improve, the needs of northern Ugandans will shift away from emergency aid toward long-term reconstruction. This will require a focused approach by the GOU and donors to meet the needs of returning northerners. End Summary.

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VOLUNTARY DECONGESTION UNDERWAY
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¶2. (SBU) As peace talks continue between the LRA and the GOU, a significant trend of resettlement by internally displaced persons (IDPs) has emerged in northern Uganda. The "decongestion" of over 200 camps has taken two forms. In the Acholi districts of Pader, Kitgum, Gulu, and the newly formed Amuru districts, IDPs are moving to sites closer to their original homes and community centers. (These sites are technically called "decongestion camps", but are often informally referred to by donors and NGOs as "land access sites", leading to some confusion. For consistency, we will use "decongestion camps" in official communication.) IDPs in Acholiland are returning to their homes to participate in farming activities during the day, but elect to continue to spend their nights within the security of the new sites or existing IDP camps. UNOCHA reports that in Gulu and the new Amuru district, 18 decongestion sites are currently occupied. In Pader, the GOU has planned 46 new sites with 18 already occupied and in Kitgum, 47 sites are planned with four that are operational. Each site has a UPDF garrison stationed in close proximity. While UNOCHA estimates that close to 100,000 people have moved to decongestion camps in Acholiland, the numbers are expected to be much higher once results are obtained from World Food Program's revalidation

census of all IDPs in Acholi district (expected start date is early September). In Lango region, UNHCR reports that nearly 120,000 people in Lira--35 percent of the displaced population in the district-- have already left the camps and are living on and working their own lands. The UN and Ugandan government agencies are taking a census in September to get a better understanding of the scope and magnitude of population movements in the north.

13. (SBU) Reporting from the UN, NGOs, the GOU, and USAID teams indicates that movement by the IDPs is voluntary. The arrival of harvest time and perceptions of a declining security threat from the LRA is fueling returns. There is no indication that the UPDF is restricting movement, although sundown to sunup curfews remain in effect in the camps and new sites in Acholi region. A recent USAID/OFDA field report notes that family members, particularly children and the elderly, have been left behind in camps while home construction and land preparation takes place in the decongestion camps.

IMPLICATIONS: CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM AMID CHALLENGES

14. (SBU) Increased food security, less crowded living conditions, and the concentration of IDPs near traditional trading centers are positive results of decongestion. The harvest is projected to be productive in most places and diverse in crop type. The UN World Food Program has reduced rations to the general camp population to 40-60 percent of the daily requirement. Recent food distribution as witnessed by poloff and OFDA officials at Amuru camp (the second largest in Gulu-Amuru district) was markedly calm. Food

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assistance experts noted the IDPs displayed no signs of the panic and disorder that often accompanies distribution in locations with food insecurity. The renewed presence of women and children in the streets in Gulu municipality and the resumption of public bus service between Kitgum and Gulu towns indicates northerners are increasingly mobile. An OFDA field officer speculates that as many as 40 percent of the displaced population could leave the original IDP camps for the decongestion camps starting in mid-October and notes that "humanitarian conditions are the best I've seen in the north in 18 months".

15. (SBU) According to the OFDA Regional Advisor, UNHCR is estimating that an additional 110,000 IDPs from Lira district will return to their lands in October when grass will be available for home construction and that approximately 100,000 will remain in Lira camps because they are from areas near the camps or are too indigent to return to their own land. There are no decongestion camps in Lira. Furthermore, IDPs interviewed in Pader stated that more family members will move to new sites once the dry grasses are available, the second harvest begins, new food distribution patterns are established, and access to healthcare and education services becomes more readily available.

16. (SBU) However, returnees are faced with significant challenges after decades of war and displacement, including re-establishment of property boundaries and a lack of infrastructure to support basic needs and the revitalization of economic activity. According to northern GOU officials and NGOs, many IDPs are returning to their lands to discover that their homes and traditional markers of property lines (such as trees) are gone. With a significant increase in returns now a becoming a reality, there is concern among stakeholders that land distribution will be a flashpoint issue. A high level of fear of the LRA remains amongst the population, and any surge in attacks could negatively affect current levels of humanitarian activity and resettlement. Infrastructure in the north cannot support massive returns in its current state and despite attempts at increased autonomy

by IDPs, many remain dependent on humanitarian agencies for services.

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UPDATE ON HUMAN RIGHTS
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¶17. (SBU) While serious human rights concerns remain, including access to healthcare and education by vulnerable groups, field reports suggest a decrease in abuses perpetrated by security forces and major reductions in child "night commuters" (reftel). IDPs in decongestion camps are reporting improved relations with local UPDF garrisons and cite UPDF presence near the decongestion camps as a key factor in their decision to move from the original IDP camps.

Some reports indicate an overall reduction in reported attacks against civilians by security forces. Protection issues including rape, particularly for women and children, continue to be a problematic. The UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Gulu is in regular contact with the UPDF on human rights issues and has found UPDF divisional commanders to be highly responsive in following up on cases. In many cases, the military has made arrests. Unfortunately, due to the weak police presence in the region, the military does not turn over its soldiers who commit crimes against civilians to local law enforcement officials, preferring instead to try them in military courts.

¶18. (SBU) The UPDF has rescued over 17,000 children from the LRA since 1996. Save the Children officers also told poloffs that after a series of training sessions on protection issues, the UPDF changed its operational tactics when attacking LRA camps to ensure the maximum protection for child victims. Non-governmental organizations also reported that the UPDF followed agreed upon procedures for processing formerly abducted children after rescues. In some cases, however, children are kept longer in UPDF's child protection unit if they have valuable time-sensitive intelligence information. Save the Children is working with the CPU to allow children in such cases to be questioned at reception centers rather than in a military environment. Non-governmental organizations arranged for meetings between the UPDF and child victims to share their experiences in captivity and during rescue operations to improve the military's handling of victims.

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¶19. (SBU) With reports of arrivals at night commuter shelters, reception centers, and UPDF child protection units markedly reduced (reftel), UNICEF and other stakeholders are assessing possible alternative uses for these locations that would support reconciliation and reconstruction activities. Field reporting and poloff visits to camps found many displaced children are not attending school. The children cited the absence of appropriate clothing and text books as the reason they are turned away. While access to water in the camps is improving, due in part to USAID programs, sanitation and healthcare are lacking, with the largest impact, as usual, on vulnerable populations.

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COMMENT
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¶10. (SBU) Decongestion, despite many challenges, is generally a good news story. We expect displaced persons to continue to return to their land, whether permanently or part-time, as long as the security situation continues to improve. Returnees, however, are going back to areas without little or no services which poses an enormous challenge to the Government of Uganda, the UN, and international donors.
BROWNING